PUBLIC OPINION AS RELATED TO THE PROBLEM OF SCHOOL DISTRICT RE-ORGANIZATION IN SELECTED AREAS IN ILLINOIS

BY

KARL LOUIS MASSANARI

B.A., Goshen College, 1936
A.M., University of Illinois, 1942
Ed.M., University of Illinois, 1948

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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This study is primarily concerned with the operation of public opinion on the local level as it is related to educational issues, more specifically, the issues associated with the reorganization of school districts in the state of Illinois.

One of the recent and most significant problems which educators encountered in Illinois with regard to public relations activities has been that of reorganizing school districts. The problem is especially important because any proposed change to become effective necessitates an expression of public support at the polls. That is to say, out of public opinion comes a collective judgment, a stamp of approval or disapproval, upon the recommended change of district organization.

In the first place, this study is concerned with the extent to which a dependable prediction can be made of the outcome of an election on a proposed school district. This study reports fairly dependable predictions of the Clinton and of the Cerro Gordo school district elections by sampling voters' opinions on postal card questionnaires.

The second concern of this study is to investigate voters' opinions with respect to a number of issues which are related to school district reorganization. During the course of the prediction surveys several additional questions were asked which concerned such related issues. The purpose of this aspect of the study was to explore the possibility that respondents who expressed different voting intentions also held different opinions about those related issues. In other words, did the voters who favored the establishment of a new, reorganized district also hold opinions on other related issues which were characteristic of that group? What opinions were characteristic of those who opposed reorganization proposals? An analysis of the responses obtained in the predictive studies indicated that major differences of opinion existed on three selected and related issues. This evidence warranted further investigation of this aspect of the problem. Therefore an intensive opinion study was conducted by interviewing a representative sample of voters in Champaign County on a number of questions concerning reorganization in this county. The responses were studied in their entirety and were broken down into various subgroups for further analysis.

Predicting the Outcome of Elections on Proposals to Establish Reorganized School Districts

A. Procedure

The procedure in both the Clinton and Cerro Gordo prediction studies involved the following steps:

1. Determining the total number of eligible registered voters in the proposed districts

2. Selecting the rural and urban samples from the total eligible registered voters

3. Obtaining the responses from the sample members on postal card questionnaires

B. Results

In the Clinton study, which was conducted first, 59.1 per cent of the rural sample members indicated that they would vote for a new school district. In the actual election, 70.5 per cent of those voting voted for the new district. Of the urban sample members, 88.8 per cent said that they would vote "yes" on the proposition to establish a new school district. In the actual election, 86.8 per cent actually voted "yes."

In the Cerro Gordo study, which was conducted about a month later, 71.2 per cent of the rural sample voters indicated that they would vote for a new school district. In the actual election, 67.0 per cent of those voting, cast favorable ballots for the establishment of a new school district. Of the urban sample members, 91.2 per cent said that they would vote "yes" on the proposition. In the actual election, 93.9 per cent voted "yes."

It is true that the predictions reported in this chapter were fairly accurate as validated against election returns. However, it does not necessarily follow that the usefulness of the technique is limited to the extent to which the prediction is exact. Elections on reorganization issues and most all other education issues demand only a majority vote to carry. The important thing for the educator to know is not exactly what per cent of the people hold favorable opinions, but rather do a majority of the voters hold favorable opinions. In other words, will the election carry? The technique is useful, then, in this respect.

Reorganization issues are not the only school matters decided at the polls by the voters. Many issues relative to financial support must be submitted to voters for approval. Changes in tax rates, bond issues, acquisition and disposition of property, all require the voters' stamp of approval at the polls. With some preliminary testing and experimentation the technique might be useful in these instances.

Polling Opinion on Certain Educational Issues Pertaining to the Reorganization of School Districts in Champaign County, Illinois

An opportunity for making the opinion study came about when the Champaign County School Survey Committee requested the Bureau of Research and Service of the College of Education, University of Illinois, to conduct a public opinion survey in this county.

At the time of the request (February, 1948), the Survey Committee had already submitted its tentative recommendations for reorganizing the school districts in the county and had conducted a series of public hearings on this report. The committee's recommendations for reorganizing the school districts in Champaign County included proposed unit districts at Fisher, Rantoul, Mahomet, Champaign, Urbana, St. Joseph, Sidney-Homer, and Tolono-Sadorus-Philo. It was also proposed that two areas in the county be included as parts of districts located in adjoining counties.

The purposes for which the opinion survey was requested were (1) to find out what voters in Champaign County thought about the eight district proposal recommended in the report, (2) to determine the attitude of voters with respect to a single board or separate boards of education for grade schools and high schools—or in other words, to what extent did voters approve of unit type districts, (3) to discover whether or not voters favored the use of advisory councils for school boards, and (4) to find out any other information which might be useful or helpful to the Survey Committee in revising its tentative report before submitting it in final form, on June first, 1948.

A. Procedure

The procedure in carrying out the public opinion study involved:

1. Determining the issues to be studied
2. Designing the interview schedule
3. Selecting the sample of voters to be interviewed
4. Selecting and training the interviewers
5. Conducting the interviews
6. Analyzing the interview returns

B. Results—Summary of Opinion Response

Voters in Champaign County favored a reduction in the "present number of school districts." They believed that a reduction in the number of districts would make possible better schools, a fairer distribution in the tax burden and more economies in expenditures. They believed further that up-to-date programs of education can be offered most economically in grade schools with enrollments one hundred (100)

and over and in high schools with enrollments three hundred (300) and over. Voters preferred separate boards of education for grade and high schools and favored the use of advisory groups for boards of education. The establishment of a county-unit school district was definitely opposed. In general about half of the voters favored the recommendation of the Survey Committee of eight unit districts for the county.

In expressing opinions on issues pertaining to the reorganization of school districts in Champaign County, the following subgroups were, as a rule, more liberal in their views than were their counterparts:

1. urban residents
2. younger age group
3. informed group
4. more educated group
5. the males
6. the upper economic class
7. school patrons

Conclusions

1. It is possible, on the basis of evidence given in this study, to make a dependable prediction of the outcome of a school district election provided that (a) opinions of all eligible registered voters are sampled, (b) the response is obtained during the ten-day period preceding the actual election, and (c) no major factors were introduced which would cause a sudden shift of opinion.

2. The predictive technique was more accurate in estimating the percentage of favorable votes to be cast in the election than it was in estimating the percentage of eligible voters who would come to the polls. One reason for this was the fact that one cannot place full confidence in a respondent's expressed intention of going to the polls. Actually, about three out of ten voted who said they intended to vote, while only one out of ten appeared at the polls when they had indicated that they probably would vote.

3. Evidence from the Clinton study suggested that those sample members who were most interested in the issue and who were most likely to go to the polls and vote were the people who returned their postal card questionnaires. In fact, of the 177 sample members, only one appeared at the polls to vote who had not returned his questionnaire. The results obtained from the follow-up interviews also support this conclusion.

4. An analysis of the opinions held by Clinton and Cerro Gordo sample respondents on three related reorganization issues indicated that major differences of opinion existed between respondents who

favored and those who opposed the establishment of a new school district. From this analysis it was determined that almost all voters who said they intended to vote "for" in the election also believed that a reorganized district would make possible better schools, a fairer distribution of the tax burden and more economies in expenditures. Generally speaking, the group of voters who expressed an intention of voting "against" in the election did not believe that reorganized districts made possible the results mentioned above. Voters who had no intention of voting in the election and those who would probably vote but not sure how were far more uncertain about what results reorganization would make possible.

5. Voters in Champaign County believed that there should be a reduction in the "present number of school districts." They were strongly opposed to the establishment of a single county unit school district. About half of the voters favored the eight district plan recommended in the tentative report. A preference was expressed for separate boards of education for grade schools and high schools as opposed to a single board recommended by the survey committee and by educators generally. Voters expressed a desire to have advisory councils for boards of education. Favorable opinion was expressed on the possibility of securing better schools, fairer distribution of taxes, and more economies through reorganized districts. Voters generally thought that modern programs of education could be offered most economically in high schools with enrollments over three hundred and in grade schools with enrollments over one hundred. A majority in Champaign and Urbana expressed opinions favorable to the merger of the two school districts of the twin cities.

6. When the response of the Champaign County respondents was broken down in terms of various background factors, the analysis indicated that the following subgroups were more liberal in their views about reorganized districts than were their counterparts: urban residents, younger age group, informed group, more educated group, males, upper economic group, and school patrons.

VITA

Karl Louis Massanari was born in Fisher, Illinois, on May 20, 1915. He graduated from the Fisher Community High School in 1932. He received his B.A. degree from Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana, in 1936. During the summer session of 1937 he attended the Graduate School of Ohio State University. In 1942 he received his M.A. degree from the University of Illinois and in 1948 his Ed.M. from the same institution.

During the school year 1936-37 he taught in the public schools of Berlin, Ohio. From 1937 to 1942 he was a teacher in the Mahomet Community High School, Mahomet, Illinois. He became principal of this high school in 1942 and served in that capacity until 1947. He served as a graduate assistant in the Bureau of Research and Service, College of Education, University of Illinois during 1947-48. In 1948 he accepted a position as Associate Professor of Education in Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana.

He is the author of (1) an article entitled "A Technique for Identifying Community Pull" published in the *Journal of Educational Sociology*, in December, 1947; (2) an article entitled "Don't Undermine Reorganization" published in *Illinois Education* in March, 1948; and (3) an article entitled "A Case Study of Five Community Unit School District Elections" published in *Illinois Education* in October, 1948.